

# The Importance of People

Dorothy J Hayes

## TEACHERS IN TRANSITION

DEAR MARY, I wish I could share your last letter with other teachers and administrators. It is so filled with the problems that are prevalent in school systems in which some of the teachers and/or the administrators are trying to move away from the more formalized subject-matter program to a school environment that takes into account what we are learning about child growth and development.

Many of us have been concerned for a long time about helping children make transitions from one grade level to another, from one stage of growth to another, but I am convinced that often we do not realize that our teachers, too, may need considerable understanding and help at various transition points in their lives. Teachers can be "in transition" in their thinking between the "old" and the "new" education (and what we call "new" may not be new at all; we are only just beginning to catch up to some of the philosophy expressed in the last century). The transition period can be one of considerable conflict. Teachers may be fighting what they call "modern education" and at the same time be feeling frightfully inadequate because they are not in step with some of the other teachers or what they think their administrator expects of them. These teachers need help; and, again, I am convinced that it is help with and understanding of their feelings that is needed.

I can visualize the faculty meeting you describe—where the teachers were encouraged to talk frankly about their feelings in regard to certain suggestions for improving the educational program for children that have come this year from the administration. And then, you say, the principal and the supervisor became disturbed because

the teachers had those feelings? Why should it be surprising that a teacher who has grown up in schools that are formal and rigidly disciplined and who may have gone to a teacher-training institution that stressed much of the same kind of training finds it hard to adjust her thinking and feelings fast enough to live comfortably in a quite different pattern? Learning in terms of previous experiences applies to teachers as it does to children; and the habit patterns and attitudes of teachers are often firmly jelled.

Why is it surprising to learn that a teacher finds it difficult to live with children in a classroom environment that she has tried to develop to please an administrator and which has not developed as an outcome of her own strong belief that children need this? She may feel in conflict because she feels caught between suggestions that she (1) incorporate into the experiences of the children all the creative opportunities possible and the acceptance of and provision for a wide range of individual differences; and (2) show an even greater intellectual growth for all the children than she felt she was formerly expected to do. Perhaps the ideas for a changed concept of the curriculum have been thrust upon her too suddenly for these ideas to have become a part of her own beliefs! Perhaps she is fighting the very suggestions that she would be making if we gave her time and opportunity to make the transition into a philosophy of education that is consistent with what we know about child development.

You and I believe that a pattern of living that seems good for children (that is, is conducive to emotional and social growth as well as intellectual and phy-

sical) develops easily and naturally for those who believe as we do. But all teachers do not agree with us, Mary; and so long as they do not agree and are fighting against being forced into something in which they feel uncomfortable and inadequate to carry out, the children are the losers!

Although they may use the words, many teachers do not honestly believe that the schools should be or can be child-centered. They do not think it is the function of the school to help the child become an effective, functioning citizen by giving him continuous experiences in feeling secure and adequate. They may want children to grow up to be democratic in their human relationships, but they may not believe that such growth demands continuous experiences in democratic citizenship from earliest childhood. They often say that the teacher must get the child ready for the next grade; but they do not believe that the child must live completely and satisfyingly at each age level to be ready for the next. They may not believe that emphasis on adjustment in one's social group must be placed above memorization. They often do not believe as we do that the child needs more success than failure experiences and that our present grading systems and competitive measures in many schools force failure on some children. They may not believe as we do that no child fails in school, but that a school may fail to understand an individual child and thus be unable to give him the environment that will permit him to realize his potentialities!

I have thought a great deal about the teacher in your meeting who cried out: "How long do I have to put up with all

the noise in my room?" Noise may be a symbol to her of work not being completed; she may truly believe the other children are disturbed by the noise because she is; and she becomes further disturbed because she thinks "modern teachers" are not supposed to be bothered by noise. It would be hard at this point for her to see that the confusion in her classroom may actually be a reflection of her own confusion as to what she and the group should be striving for.

And the other teacher who said, "But how can I keep one group busy when I am working with another group? When you leave children to their own resources, they just fool and waste time!" Can't you see how this looks to her in terms of her own experience? She may not have had the opportunity to gain the understanding that when children have continuous opportunities from earliest childhood to participate in planning their activities, in making decisions, in evaluating their own progress, they do not just fool and waste time. She cannot be expected to accept your and my ideas and translate them into a "plan of action with children" unless she believes them—until they are a part of her own philosophy rather than another person's she may be trying (unsuccessfully) to adopt.

Mary, I think we need to keep thinking about the problems of the "teacher in transition" and to explore ways of providing ample opportunities for her to build a philosophy of education that is consistent with the best we know about the way children learn. Teachers with such a philosophy can be trusted to demand and work through changes in curriculum and "teaching techniques."

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